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ABSTRACT

This study explored the effect of community background on the development of adolescent ambition, using longitudinal interviews to probe subjects' own definitions and evaluations of progress toward the "good life." Sixty high ability working class youths from three New England towns varying in size, urban proximity, and social class composition, were interviewed in their senior year of high school and again three to four years later. All youths perceived entry into high school as a critical juncture in the development of their ambition and all planned on college as a means to upward mobility. However, the youths' pursuit of mobility showed many different experiences. In the small working class town, students felt personally supported by both high school and parents and viewed occupational mobility and small town life as desirable and compatible. Going away to college introduced them to diversity, stimulating an interest in personal growth and a devaluation of small town life. In the larger working class city, students found the high school very unsupportive and relied on adults outside the school system, primarily family, for reinforcement. As commuting college students, they had to work hard at balancing the competing demands of school, family, and friends. In the middle class town, students experienced an academic status loss as they entered high school and found themselves to be in vulnerable social positions. These experiences triggered early self questioning. For these students, self doubts, community estrangement, and the search for congruence between personal and occupational goals intensified at college. The paper concludes with a discussion of the developmental processes through which socioeconomic and community variables are translated into effects upon individuals. (Author/RM)

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# PURSUING THE GOOD LIFE:

# COMMUNITIES AS DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXTS FOR UPWARDLY MOBILE YOUTH

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Despite the gains in complexity and sensitivity made by survey research in the last decade, we are far from understanding so important a topic as the development and meaning of ambition in young people's lives. A primary reason for this failure lies in the dominant methodology: multi-variate correlational analysis is based upon linear models which can only rank order the relative strength of competing influences upon objectively measured outcomes. Thus, although it has been demonstrated that, for example, social class, ability level, school performance, academic self-conception, and school status all contribute to individual ambition in varying degrees at varying points in time (Kerchoff, 1974), we have little understanding of how these variables interact with each other in the course of individual lives.

The basic flaw in linear models is that they assume that individuals are passive subjects bombarded by influences whose behavior is determined at any point in time by the most powerful forces impinging upon them. This assumption both oversimplifies and distorts the influence process. Left out of consideration are the active efforts individuals make to understand and reconcile the competing influences affecting their life choices, and to construe and direct the course of their own development.

These limitations are especially problematic in studies of the impact of social context. Since the meaning of individual variation depends upon

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*I would like to thank Prudence King and Ellen Solomon, my collaborators in the many phases of this research; my analysis here is based in part on their community studies of Milltown and Cityville (King, 1978 and Solomon, 1977). Ellen Solomon supported the writing of this paper in numerous ways--her substantive and editorial contributions are substantial. I would also like to thank Pamela Daniels and Eleanor Duckworth for their careful and encouraging response to a first draft. The research was supported in part by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

context, the standard practice of controlling for individual variation may mask the very effects it is intended to illuminate. For example, as Nelson (1972) has shown, students at every ability level rank higher in low status schools than they do in high status schools; thus, school status and class rank, both of which have independent effects on ambition, may cancel each other out in aggregate data. Statistical techniques have been developed for separating out the opposing contributions of intercorrelated contextual variables (Alexander and Eckland, 1975), but I am not convinced that these analytically derived models of the components of ambition-enhancing contexts contribute much to our understanding of the process of individual development in actual social contexts. In my view, if we hope to identify the "micro-social interpersonal relations and psychological processes through which macro-social structures come to have individual effects," (House, 1977, p. 171), we must look at developmental contexts more holistically and turn our attention to the ways in which young people arrive at conceptions of the future as they make sense of their own experiences in the communities where they have grown up. Community analysis may give us the bridge we need between social structure and the development of individual meaning systems.

The work I discuss in this paper attempts, in its goals and methodology, to move in this direction. It starts from two interrelated premises: 1) that the ways young people themselves interpret their experiences growing up in different community contexts is a valuable and, for the most part, untapped data source on the role of context in the development of ambitions; and, 2) that it is important to examine subjective definitions and evaluations of progress toward the good life.

Let me elaborate for a moment on the second premise. In my view, there has been too great an emphasis on predicting educational and occupational

outcomes and too little recognition of the continuing process of setting life goals and evaluating the progress one is making in moving toward those goals. Social contexts may influence, not only how high individuals aim, but also how they feel about their personal progress; and there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between level of ambition and self-evaluation. The potential for differential effects exists because, as Kelley (1952) noted in his seminal paper, reference groups serve both normative and comparative functions. Thus, for example, communities may spur young people on to greater heights through exposing them to high community expectations and at the same time generate doubts about performance through judging them relative to high standard comparison groups. To unravel the processes through which contextual influences are translated into individual aspirations, we must examine the development of meanings of ambition.

An Outline of the Study

The findings I shall present are drawn from a longitudinal interview study of the life experience and ideological development of sixty potentially mobile youth--thirty males, thirty females--from three contrasting communities. To highlight the interplay among contextual influences, we sampled the same kinds of individuals--"bright"[1] working-class youth - in varying community contexts - a small factory town, a working-class city, and a predominantly middle-class inner suburb.[2] What concerned us most in choosing communities

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[1]"Brightness" was operationally defined as an IQ score of 115 or higher on the latest test results available in the student's school records.

[2]Our original plans included a fourth community - a predominantly middle-class small community. We abandoned this sample both because of time pressures and because of our inability to locate a middle-class outer suburb with a large enough group of "bright" working class students.

was their size, their socio-economic mix, and their relative proximity to the nearest major urban area. Both Cityville and Townline were quite close to a large New England city but Cityville was predominantly working class while Townline was predominantly middle-class. Milltown was about twenty miles away from the city; it was predominantly working class.[3] Community differences dictated sampling strategy. In the working-class communities, Milltown and Cityville, the sample was drawn from all members of the high school senior class with IQs above 115. In the middle-class community, Townline, father's occupation was added to IQ as a sampling criteria.[4]

Initial Questions: We began with the belief that the meaning of being bright and working class would vary among the communities. Our intention was first to compare how young people themselves experienced and interpreted the interplay of influences we thought might exist within their particular context, and then to examine the relevance of this interplay to their conclusions about the meaning of ambition in their lives. Let me spell out some of our early thoughts.

First, we assumed that socio-economic mix was reflected in both the normative expectations and the relative status of working-class children within a community. Thus, we anticipated that high ability working-class youth in

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[3]U.S. Census data, 1960

| | Milltown | Cityville | Townline |
|---|---|---|---|
| Population | 7,700 | 95,000 | 54,000 |
| % Blue Collar | 70% | 68% | 27% |

[4]In Milltown, almost every senior with an IQ above 115 was interviewed; in Cityville, the sample consisted of one-fifth of the members of the senior class with 115+ IQs; and, in Townline, half the sample was drawn from those seniors with 115+ IQs whose fathers had blue-collar jobs and half was drawn from those seniors with 115+ IQs whose fathers had white-collar and sales jobs.

Milltown and Cityville, the working class communities, would experience lower normative expectations and higher individual status than their counterparts in Townline, the middle class community. We wondered how these variations would influence young people's assessments of their life chances and how these assessments, in turn, were linked to their conceptions of the good life, and the distinctions they made between themselves and more and less fortunate people in their communities and in the larger society.

Second, we thought that community size might affect the nature of supports and cross-pressures experienced, particularly during the high school years. In Milltown, the small community, adolescents were likely to be personally known by adults and to receive more consistent messages about appropriate life choices. Opportunities to participate actively in community life might generate a sense of personal security and belongingness; yet, limited contact with diversity might retard the growth of social awareness, leaving potentially mobile youth less prepared to make their way in the complex world beyond their town. In Cityville and Townline, larger and more urban communities, we suspected that adolescents had more experience with diversity and thus might learn how to cope with social complexity at an earlier age. This developmental advantage though might be offset by impersonal treatment in large high schools and exposure to conflicting messages about the value of individual mobility, experiences which could generate personal confusion about future pathways.

The Interviews: We interviewed at two points in time - first, during the second half of the senior year in high school, a period we assumed was a critical decision making time for future life choices, and then again, three to four years later, after our sample had had an opportunity to experience and evaluate their first forays into the adult world. We succeeded in re-interviewing 57 of the sixty original sample members.

Given our interest in understanding the process through which contextual variables are translated into individual experience and perceptions, we did not want to make the mistake of assuming that the community influence processes we had identified as critical were experienced as significant by our interviewees. Thus, we proceeded inductively, beginning with "open-ended" questions designed to elicit salient concerns and constructs, and then casting a wide net in order to gain a sense of the perceived importance and connections among a range of individual and contextual factors.

In both interviews, we asked about the significant events and influences in these young people's current lives, probing for key experiences in the family, with friends, at school and at work. Then we explored their hopes and plans for the future, seeking elaborations of personal definitions of "the good life" and beliefs about opportunities and constraints in the years ahead. We also questioned them about their views of American society and, in particular, about their views of power, opportunity, and social justice - that is, who exercised control and influence in society, how one got ahead, and what steps they felt should be taken to alleviate societal problems.[5]

Each time we interviewed, we asked sample members to compare and contrast themselves with other young people and with their parents, to describe how they felt they had changed since entry into or graduation from high school, and to identify critical developmental events and significant others in their lives. In the follow-up interview, we probed in greater depth for self-conceptions and developmental explanations, asking for retrospective views of the meaning of being from their social class and community, understandings of and strategies for dealing with competing messages, and self-evaluations of progress toward defining and pursuing "the good life."

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[5]A major aim of the study was to clarify the connections between personal and societal views - in particular, to explore the extent to which students applied their conclusions about the workings of society in assessing their own life chances. Findings relevant to these questions from the initial interview are discussed in Steinitz (1973, 1976).

Community Contrasts

The basic aim of the analysis was to trace the processes through which young people's understandings of the influence of community context on their development were linked to their interpretations of the meaning of ambition in their lives. The data analysis was qualitative and involved three steps: 1) identification of salient themes in individual narratives; 2) identification of modal patterns within each community; and 3) analysis of commonalities and contrasts among the modal patterns in the three communities.[6]

By their senior year in high school, virtually all the young people in our sample felt they had developed into persons with ambition and plans; they had accepted the urgings of their families and school authorities and intended to work their way through college so that they could obtain more financially rewarding, secure and dignified jobs than their parents had. To this extent, upward mobility was being pursued by the youths in all three communities.[7] But differences among the communities in the meaning of mobility and the experiences accompanying its pursuit were pronounced. These variations included the ways in which sense of self is related to one's definition of ambition, the nature of cross-pressures,

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[6]My focus here is on differences among community modal patterns; there was also substantial within-community variation, particularly in Townline, but its analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

[7]There were community differences in degree of certainty about career choices at the time of the high school interviews. Milltown sample members were most likely to have settled on a specific career choice; Cityville and Townline sample members were more tentative about their plans.

| High School Career Aspirations: | Milltown | Cityville | Townline |
|---|---|---|---|
| High Professions e.g., doctor, lawyer, scientist | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| Middle Professions e.g., teacher, social worker, pharmacist | 6 | 5 | 4 |
| Semi-professions. e.g., nurse, physical therapist, draftsman | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| White collar e.g., secretary | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Uncertain | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| | 20 | 20 | 20 |

discontinuities, and supports experienced in one's family and community, and the complexity of criteria used in defining the good life. These differences bear out and extend our original assumptions about the role of community context and I will discuss them briefly here in terms of first the young people's perceptions of their high school years and then the years after high school

Perceptions of High School Careers: As these youths perceive it, entry into high school was a critical juncture in the development of their ambition. This transition marked the beginning of their decisions about the future and awareness of the public and private implications of those goals. There was only one high school in each community we studied and young people's accounts of the high school years reveal their perceptions of the community influences transmitted by that institution in relation to past schooling, on-going relationships with family and friends, and emerging sense of self. The course of high school careers had different implications for youth in each community, implications that prefigured developments in the years after high school graduation.

Beginning high school presented fewest discontinuities to Milltown youngsters, for they had attended the town-wide elementary and junior high schools and thus already knew the students in their grade. The new teachers they met at the high school were often familiar with incoming students, already having taught other members of their families. Everyone knew everyone else at Milltown High; the principal's friendliness was typical of this "one big happy family." In contrast, Cityville and Townline youth faced great changes when they entered high school. The transition from small neighborhood-based elementary schools to the large town-wide high school introduced many of them, for the first time, to students from other parts of the community.[8] It also moved them into an impersonal, bureaucratic setting where students felt anonymous, identified primarily by their ID numbers.

[8]Townline had K-8 elementary schools; in Cityville, there were two steps to the process - gathering into two junior highs, one on either side of town, and then into the high school.

But despite the similar large scale and impersonality, high school held different meanings and implications for the ambitions of these Cityville and Townline youth. These differences seem related to the socio-economic mix in the two towns: in Cityville, members of our sample were part of a relatively homogeneous working class city and saw the high school as but one among many possible guides to and supports for their futures. Cityville youth were critical of the impersonality and unfairness they experienced at Cityville High, convinced they could not rely on school personnel for encouragement or competent guidance, and angry that the few teachers who addressed important social issues were dismissed. But our Cityville interviewees drew upon people and resources in their lives outside school for their motivation and support, relegating school to the position of a limited means to the ends they sought. For these upwardly mobile Cityville youth, the primary reinforcers of the importance of school achievement had been adults outside the school system - parents, family, friends, and employers. Above all, it was their parents who had convinced them of the value of pursuing their educations and it was in comparison with their parents that they evaluated their own progress and future plans. Having ambitions was a personal matter, not much discussed outside the family.

This separation between school and the rest of one's life was reflected in the social world of these Cityville youths. There were few organized activities for young people in town and little continuity between life in school and life after school. Social life centered around peer groups, based either in the neighborhood or extended family. Separated from their friends by different academic schedules during the school day, our interviewees looked forward to rejoining their friends after they had all put in their hours at after-school jobs. Students, especially the boys, reported some conflicts between their desire to spend time with friends and the demands of homework; they also felt that high academic achievement - "breaking the curve" was negatively sanctioned by classmates on occasion. They viewed these peer pressures as minor problems though; as long as

academic success was not flaunted, peer acceptance could be maintained. For the most part, our Cityville sample members believed they had been successful in balancing the competing demands on their time and loyalties during their high school careers and they did not believe that the pursuit of upward mobility would require them to give up close friendships in the future.

High school had more pervasive and problematic meaning for members of the Townline sample who were part of the working class minority in a predominantly middle class town with a large and visible wealthy elite. Nationally known for its academic excellence, Townline High held considerable significance for the way these young people came to think about themselves and their future plans. Their academic performance that had been highly praised in their neighborhood public or parochial schools was viewed by the High School as inferior to the standards of elementary schools in wealthier neighborhood. This shift which moved members of our sample from "the top of the bottom to the bottom of the top" (as one interviewee put it) and into lower tracked "programs" at Townline High, precipitated an abrupt loss of status for them, doubts about their capabilities, and troubled reflections about the perpetuation of socio-economic position through the educational institutions of the town.

Their sophistication as sociological observers did not lessen the authority of the high school over their perceptions of themselves. This consequence seemed to arise because our Townline sample members felt themselves to be in vulnerable social positions, on the margins of the many polarized cliques in the high school and apart from their original neighborhood friends who had been placed at varying academic levels. Continuing experiences of social marginality compounded the personal and academic uncertainties engendered by their loss of academic status on high school entry. These uncertainties were somewhat mitigated by the presence of Townline High's many sympathetic guidance counselors, social workers, and "house" masters, who helped our interviewees deal with the academic problems and

social exclusion they faced. These school personnel who mediated between the students and the institution became important adults to these young people whose parents still lived in homogeneous worlds and were unable to understand the complexity of their children's experience.

These different perceptions of experience of high school in Milltown, Cityville, and Townline were linked to the meanings that upward mobility held for youth in the three communities. And perceptions of high school and mobility were in turn linked to definitions of the good life which varied according to each community. The plans of all these youths as they faced the end of high school rested upon conceptions of the sorts of persons they wanted to become, the relationship they intended to have with their original community, and perceptions of difference and distinction they felt between themselves and those who inhabited their communities, and the larger society.

In Milltown, while entry into high school presented few challenges or discontinuities, it did mark a significant step in the progression toward an adulthood in which responsibilities and steady work were valued. Encouraged to work toward college - both by doing well in school and by holding jobs after school hours - Milltown youth were also expected to participate actively in team sports, service organizations, and other organized youth activities. Our interviewees felt their lives were highly organized and closely watched by their parents and teachers; they reported some feelings of time pressure and performance anxiety but, in the main, our Milltown interviewees took pride in their ability to fulfill their mounting responsibilities. They saw themselves as members of the achievement oriented group at the high school and looked forward to reaping the rewards for their efforts when they returned to Milltown after the completion of their college training.

These young people were enthusiastic about life in Milltown, its wholesomeness - which they contrasted with life in nearby, wealthier suburbs - and

friendliness. Beyond that, they gave little thought to the world beyond their town. They looked forward to leading lives similar to their parents' - the only change would be their more secure and more interesting professional jobs. Also, they downplayed differences between themselves and high school peers who were not oriented toward work and achievement. Our interviewees saw such peers as simply "immature" or the product of unfortunate upbringing, not as lucky as themselves whose parents had cared enough to monitor their behavior and to impress upon them the importance of "having goals."

Youth from Cityville had similar hopes and expectations for a continuous adulthood, one that sustained their important relationships with family and friends and which, because of the more rewarding and personally challenging jobs they anticipated, would make it possible for them to be more lively and involved parents to their own, future children. As they moved up - and perhaps out of the urban crowdedness of Cityville - they expected to maintain their friendships with peers who were not college-bound; in their minds there was no difference between themselves and such friends. But they did make a definite distinction between themselves and their friends, and those Cityville youth who "didn't care" enough about themselves or others to try to "make something of themselves." Drifting, given to violence and drugs, such youths were perceived to be of substantially different character from our interviewees. They made another critical distinction between people like themselves and persons and institutions in the world outside Cityville. Government and big business were run by people who were greedy and self-serving, unconcerned for the fate and plight of ordinary people. Such characteristics were assumed to be intrinsic to the process of wanting to "make it big" - in aiming and climbing high it was inevitable that one would sever one's ties to one's family and friends and thereby lose the capacity to care and be cared about by others. These Cityville young people wanted no part of that process. Instead, they saw themselves heading toward a mobility that included all they cherished.

Townline students had experienced greater pressures toward individuation, pressures which had also raised questions about the criteria for defining a worthwhile future. Coping with experiences of inclusion and exclusion had focused their attention on the issue of the costs of group membership and, although they had missed the security and ease of peer group membership, they valued the ability to think for themselves which had been stimulated by their positions on the "fringes." The adults at Townline High had stressed to them the value of developing internalized standards and making one's own choices; politically radical students and teachers, vocal during our interviewees' years at the high school, had argued that the choice of conventional goals was tantamount to "buying into the system." These influences, combined with their perceptions of college-going as a community norm, challenged Townline sample members to reject their parents' emphasis on financial security as too limited a goal, and instead to search for personally congruent life choices, to figure out what they "really wanted" and who, individually, they "really were." Such a process distinguished for them the "together" students they admired from their less developed classmates.

The burden of personal choice weighed heavily upon these Townline youths as they looked ahead to the world beyond high school graduation for they felt unable to spell out their definitions of the good life until they resolved personal identity issues. In the meantime, they worried that false steps could be costly - more so for them than for their more affluent classmates whose identity searches would be subsidized and who could always, in the end, step into their parents' privileged positions.

Post-High School Careers: During the years after graduation from high school, the young people from all three communities pursued their plans for further training - in school, on the job, and, most often, in both educational and work settings. The great majority had matriculated at some form of college in September, 1972 and by the time of the second set of interviews in 1975-76, 44 of the 57 had

finished, were just about to finish, or were considering how to continue the schooling they had begun.[9] Going to college presented youth from each community with different challenges to and confirmations of their expectations of mobility and adulthood. I will focus here on community variations in the perceptions of the 44 sample members who had completed at least two years of post-high school education.[10]

Leaving their small, homogeneous town for college brought Milltown youth up against more serious adjustment problems than they had anticipated. Living on campus in large universities, they felt at first ill-equipped to cope with anonymity and confused by the diversity of life-styles and viewpoints around them. Most of these young people regained their bearings by the end of their first year and began to identify themselves primarily as college students. While pre-college career directions tended to be maintained, by the time of the follow-up interviews

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[9]Educational status at time of follow-up interview:

| | Milltown | Cityville | Townline |
|---|---|---|---|
| In school | | | |
| Enrolled in four year college program | 13 | 10 | 13 |
| Not in school | | | |
| Completed at least two years of post-secondary schooling | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| No post-secondary schooling or left school after one year or less | 5 | 6 | 2 |
| | 20 | 18 | 19 |

[10]There were also community variations in reasons for not continuing on in school as well as contrasting patterns of sex differences. Cityville women and Milltown men were the most persistent in their pursuit of a college education; Cityville men and Milltown women were most likely not to have gone on at all or to have dropped out early on. Differences in attitudes toward early marriage and satisfying work may explain these contrasts. While Cityville women viewed early marriage as a trap and were intent on completing their educations before being tied down, Milltown women were more willing to postpone their educational plans in order to concentrate on relationships with potential mates. And, while Cityville men described their growing convictions that they could earn a good living without a college degree, Milltown men remained committed to the attainment of professional careers. Thus, Cityville men and Milltown women attributed their failure to continue in school to the attractions of competing pathways; in contrast, Townline sample members were more likely to explain educational interruptions as time out for personal reflection.

they had drawn from their experiences very different conclusions about their ties to Milltown and their future life-styles. While they continued to value the simplicity and wholesomeness of their Milltown upbringing, they no longer wanted such surroundings in their own adulthoods. They had discovered the attractions of novelty and change and wanted to pursue their lives in more cosmopolitan places. They did not devalue their community for they saw it still as a good place for children to grow up. But for young adults like themselves who were not committed to self-development, staying in Milltown would mean stagnation. While in high school they had emphasized the close bonds that united all Milltown teenagers, they now made definite distinctions between themselves and their classmates who had remained in town and gone directly to work after graduation. Our interviewees described their former classmates as "stuck in ruts," leading boring, routine lives very different from the personal fulfillment and continued growth they expected to enjoy in their own lives and careers.

Personal growth had become a criterion for self-evaluation for Townline youth when they were high school students; they had looked forward to going away to college in hopes that it would be a place conducive to self-discovery and the pursuit of upward mobility. Once there, they discovered that the two goals were not necessarily complementary. Self-questioning complicated the task of defining and pursuing educational and occupational goals.

Many viewed college as less academically demanding than Townline High; still, their college careers were punctuated with interruptions - time out for personal reflection, shifts in courses of study, transfers from private to public institutions. Half the students began at private colleges but a number transferred by the time of the follow-up interviews. They described an intensification of their sense of relative deprivation vis-a-vis the affluent majority, a growing awareness of the opportunities that were not available to them because they had to work their way through college. Too, they were disappointed with the academic quality

of the educations they were receiving; they had decided that they could obtain as good an education from a state institution with far less financial sacrifice.

Townline youth attributed their erratic post-high school careers to personal confusion; as they became more concerned with questions of personal identity and meaning, they were less able to continue moving on without a clear sense of purpose. Their own concerns for authenticity intensified their anger at Townline's hypocrisy - the illusion of equal opportunity and the reality of privileges for the already privileged. More marginal in high school to their community than either Milltown or Cityville students, these Townline young people viewed themselves in their college years as being on their own. For the most part, they faced their personal explorations without the support or understanding of their families and had lost contact with earlier friends. Living on their own, many in apartments rather than college dormitories, they were proud of their survival skills. They felt that they had demonstrated their independence, that they could manage on their own, and these accomplishments gave them the confidence to continue their search for specific career goals and the self-directed adulthoods they valued.

The years after high school were perceived by Cityville youth as presenting fewer discontinuities and challenges to their original hopes and goals. Unlike Milltown and Townline youth, they did not leave their community behind when they entered college. Instead, they persisted in their efforts to pursue upward mobility and simultaneously to maintain close ties with friends and family in their original neighborhoods. These Cityville young people continued the separation between in-school and out-of-school life which had begun in high school: they left Cityville each morning for college and part-time work and returned each evening. Although many cited personal growth that had been sparked by college experiences, college was viewed primarily as a place for career preparation. Their lives remained centered on their families and old friends at home, and they expected this duality to continue as they made their way into their chosen careers.

Within this continuity of perception and expectation, however, there had been some substantial changes. Most of our Cityville interviewees felt that through their financial contributions to their own schooling and to the family, and their responsibilities during parental illness, they had become recognized as mature young people and had achieved considerable autonomy from their parents. In addition, Cityville youth felt that their colleges and jobs had exposed them to diverse people and situations outside Cityville and that they had become more confident about their ability to make their way in what had once seemed strange territory. Contact with young people from other communities had made them resentful of the inadequate educational resources in Cityville which had, they felt, deprived them of opportunities available to children who had grown up elsewhere. The negative image of Cityville held by persons they had more recently met had also heightened their belief that they should move to less crowded places to raise their own children. But they imagined their future suburban homes filled with their own friends and new, very similar ones, and they planned to maintain their old Cityville ties. They felt more need than ever to reassure their friends who had not gone to college of the lack of difference between them.

While Townline sample members measured their independence in terms of separation and individuation, our Cityville interviewees viewed independence as the gradual assumption of greater responsibilities - both for themselves and for the people to whom they felt close. And, while upward mobility came increasingly to mean self-development for Milltown college students, Cityville students were intent on demonstrating that they could remain the same persons while moving up the socio-economic ladder.

Developmental Processes

Our research represents a first step toward the development of an alternative methodology for studying the role of context in the development of ambition. By comparing the interpretations of their situations of adolescents whose family status

and ability levels are similar but who grew up in communities of contrasting size and socio-economic mix, we have learned something about both the particularity and comparability of communities as developmental contexts. Initially, we speculated that contextual variations would be expressed in normative expectations, relative individual status, and the personalism, continuity and complexity of socialization experiences and wondered how these variables would affect the meaning of ambition, feelings about individual progress and the complexity of self-conceptions.

Most interesting were our discoveries about the close ties between evolving meanings of ambition and changing self-conceptions in the three communities. The great majority of young people in our sample took pride in their commitment to make something of themselves and in their accomplishments to date: they viewed themselves as strivers and achievers. Where they differed was in other criteria which were equally central to their self-definitions. Milltown youth became interested in self-development in college; when they added that value to their commitment to achievement, mobility came to mean moving on beyond their community as well as moving up the socio-economic ladder. Cityville youth had dual allegiances through high school and college: they valued their identities as strivers but it was equally important to them that they be and be seen as caring persons in their community; mobility achieved at the expense of relationships would diminish rather than enhance their self-esteem. Townline youth became self-questioners during high school as a result of experiences of academic and social marginality. Figuring out who they were became a prerequisite for deciding where they should be headed. For Townline youth to feel satisfied with their ambitions, these had to represent both upward mobility and personally congruent choices. While these youth were trying to resolve identity issues, they evaluated themselves primarily in terms of their ability to be self-directed and self-reliant. These community variations in self-definitions point up the importance of looking at levels of aspiration in the context of broader definitions of the good life.

I would like to conclude with four recommendations about ways of thinking about and studying contextual variations in developmental processes. First, I believe it is essential to look at development over time in order to assess the impact of social context. Comparing young people's perspectives when they are still living within their communities with their retrospective views is a valuable source of insights about the evolution of meaning systems. Also, the initial impact of a contextual event may or may not be a good predictor of its eventual developmental meaning, another reason for exploring individual responses over time. A good example from our research is the complexity of the processes triggered by academic status loss on high school entry for Townline youth. For many, memories of the initial impact were traumatic; the experience precipitated crises of self-confidence. Yet, efforts to understand and cope with their situations resulted, for some, in strengthened feelings of self-worth and confidence in their ability to overcome future obstacles. Which way the scale tips - whether the long term result is damaged self-esteem and a scaling down of aspirations or a reaffirmed sense of self-worth and a willingness to seek further challenges - depends on a number of things: the availability of supports, the developmental timing of the challenge, the intensity of other stresses, etc.

Second, we can learn a great deal by examining contextual variations in the meaning of transition points - in particular, by comparing the degree and kinds of discontinuities young people face as they move through their school careers. Transitions into and out of high school are critical developmental events in our society, markers of progress toward adulthood. Depending on community characteristics, these transitions may also change the way individuals are treated, the relative status of individuals and their comparative frames of reference. Discontinuities make salient and problematic, self-conceptions or ways of thinking that had previously been taken for granted; they thus have the potential for prompting large-scale changes in meaning systems. Two illustrations of major transitional discontinuities

from our study are the academic status loss on high school entry experienced by Townline sample members and the separation from small town life reported by Milltown youth when they went away to college. In both instances, exposure to diversity triggered more differentiated ways of seeing oneself.

Third, we must think through the relationships between objective measures and subjective definitions of ambition. For instance, it seems probable that the level of mobility attained by Cityville youth will, in fact, be depressed by their commitment to interpersonal relationships; yet, from the perspective of our Cityville sample members, if the pursuit of upward mobility resulted in the loss of close friendships, they might not feel successful, for their vision of the good life includes both individual achievement and personal attachments. Again, by tracing the evolution of meanings over time, we may gain some understanding of how individuals who have grown up in particular sub-cultures respond on discovering prevailing societal definitions of success.

These responses, I believe, depend in part on the kinds of information-processing strategies learned in the course of one's development; and such strategies also vary as a function of context. This leads to my fourth recommendation, that we attend to the nature of the belief-dilemmas individuals confront in different communities, and search for connections between specific kinds of dilemmas and characteristic modes of resolution. It might be useful to begin by contrasting ways of coping with long-term cross-pressures as opposed to transitional discontinuities. Individuals who live with competing messages over long periods of time seem to develop strategies for managing the conflict which are different in kind from modes of responding to transitional changes in definitions of the situation. For instance, Cityville youth had had years of experience balancing competing demands on their time and loyalties. In continuous contact with neighborhood and extended family groups who expected a primary allegiance to communal ties, they worked at convincing significant others and themselves that having ambitions had not and would not transform them into selfish, non-caring individuals.

While compromising, reconciling, and if all else fails, compartmentalizing are strategies for coping with simultaneous competing demands, sequential shifts in the relative positions of individuals may trigger different kinds of re-organization of beliefs. The Milltown reversal of views about the value of small town life is one such example. The continuity with their parents' lives that had seemed so attractive in high school came in college to be viewed as stagnation and they became seekers after personal growth. The extent to which their beliefs changed once they encountered social diversity may be a function of their prior inexperience in dealing with competing messages. Their original conceptions of the future had been vague and undifferentiated, for the homogenization of Milltown had provided little impetus for individual elaboration. Removed from their childhood context, presented with an alternative vision, and having few strategies for reconciling conflicting messages, they underwent large-scale transformations in self-definitions and definitions of the good life.

Finally, let me make explicit my awareness that placing subjects' meanings at the center of the inquiry greatly complicates the task of linking contextual variables to individual outcomes. Still, if we aspire to models that accurately reflect the complexity of the processes through which social contexts affect the course of individual lives, we must turn our attention to comparative studies of the development of individual meaning systems.

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